

# Power Struggle

by Kim Hitzelberger Fernandez

*It started out innocently enough, with two days of sailing lessons. But before long her once-sensible husband had descended into madness—another victim of sailboat fever.*

I GREW UP ON POWER. SINCE I WAS FIVE, WHEN MY DAD BOUGHT the family's first Penn Yan, boating on the Bay has meant zooming around, clutching the arms of a canvas deck chair atop two roaring marine engines. I married a fellow power lover and we agreed that our first major joint purchase—after the house, of course—would be a Boston Whaler. The only questions were: what size Whaler would be right for the two of us and the chocolate Lab we dreamed about, and how much horsepower could we afford?

Yes, life was good. After all, Joe and I had what everyone knows is the key to a rock-solid relationship: similar taste in boats. So I wasn't especially concerned when he signed up for a two-day sailing class as part of an article he was writing for his company's magazine. Not to worry, I told myself; he's a throttle man through and through. Floating along at the mercy of the breeze will drive him crazy. He's impervious to sailing fever.

I was dead wrong.

He came home from the first day of sailing lessons gleefully tossing about ugly words like "keel" and "mainsail" and "tacking." Worse still, he prattled on about how peaceful it was on the silent water, without the roar of twin Chryslers underneath. After the second day, there was more nonsense about the tranquility of sailing and the "collaboration with nature," and now he was talking about buying new deck shoes and how-to-sail books. Did I realize, he asked, how inexpensive sailboats are? This shook me to the core, but I remained calm. Then the other shoe fell.

"We should get a sailboat," he said. "You'd love it!"

My heart stopped. I wanted to scream, but I didn't. I wanted to lock him in the closet until he came to his senses, but I didn't. I simply said, in the most pathetic, manipulative voice I could muster, "But . . . what about the *Whaler*? . . . We don't have room for both." Of course, the subtext of that was: *What about our dream? Are you abandoning our dream? Don't you love me anymore? Are we drifting apart?*

Silence. Apparently, the subtext came through loud and clear, because he dropped the subject, and that was the end of the madness. But only temporarily. A few months later came an invitation to my new employer's end-of-summer cruise. On a sailboat—a schooner, to be exact, berthed in Ego Alley. We parked ourselves on the deck for two hours, sang along with Jimmy Buffett and enjoyed the breeze.

"Isn't this great?" Joe asked. That glassy-eyed look was

back. "Sure," I said, with one eye on the boom, which had nearly decapitated me moments earlier. "But, you know, besides getting our own beers, we haven't actually done any work. Ask the crew if they're having fun." He did. They were.

It doesn't take a Ph.D. to guess what happened next. Joe started shopping, and before long he had picked out the tiniest craft I had ever seen outside of a bathtub. Sure, it was cute, even I could admit that much. But the term "seaworthy" didn't exactly leap to mind.

I tried pouting, to no avail. I tried redirecting his boat lust, steering him at every chance toward 17-foot Whalers—the ones that looked like fiberglass tributes to testosterone itself. It didn't work. I tried logic and common sense, zeroing in on the most hideous drawbacks of sailing—total dependence on the wind, for starters. "God's too busy with Bosnia and all," I said. "He can't possibly have time to make sure we have a breeze to get us home every Sunday night."

Despite my best efforts, a brochure soon appeared on our coffee table. It was a dastardly piece of propaganda—glossy and colorful, filled with pictures of perfect people enjoying perfect days on calm waters

aboard their nine-foot sailboats. The next Saturday, we went to see one of the little boats in person. It took up a single parking space in an asphalt lot. The two of us could easily carry it.

"It's not a Whaler," I said flatly, unable to muster a subtext this time. He had worn me down. "We'll get one of those later," he said, softly stroking the rubber trim.

Clearly, the battle was lost. His eyes said it all; he was a goner. There was nothing I could do. Two months and one classified ad later, we owned a nine-foot sailboat. And the hard part was still to come: I had to break the news to Dad.

"Dad," I said with a gulp. "We bought a boat!"

"You did?" I could hear the excitement in his voice. "A Whaler? How big?"

Damn!

"Uh, no," I said, closing my eyes. "It's . . . um . . . it's a sailboat. But it's really cute and small and looks like it'll go really fast!" A long moment passed before he spoke again. "Jean," he said to my mother, "Your daughter bought a *sailboat*. Did you know about this?"

Sometime this summer, I guess, the boat will make its debut on the Bay, with me tangled in lines and praying for a gentle wind. But I didn't lose the whole battle. I'm naming the boat *Boston Whaler*. ■

